

# Retreat Puts College on Radar: Low-Income High School Students Learn They Can Continue Education and Get Help With Applications, Aid

By Kimberly S. Wetzel, Contra Costa Times, Walnut Creek, Calif.

Aug. 12--As Monique Washington wrapped up her junior year of high school, she still wasn't sure what she wanted to do after graduation.

She knew she had another year to decide, and she knew she was interested in nursing. But college didn't seem to be a realistic option for Washington, who attends Leadership Public School in Richmond, a public charter high school. And with a 2.1 grade point average, she didn't think she had a solid chance of getting in anywhere anyway.

"I had a thought in my mind that I wasn't going to make it to college," Washington, 17, said. "I never thought that with a 2.1 GPA, I could go to a university."

But her attitude changed dramatically in July, when she was chosen as one of six economically disadvantaged LPS students with leadership potential to attend a four-day college retreat called the College Summit Workshop at the University of the Pacific.

The workshop, one of many held across the United States by the nonprofit group College Summit, provides students in the 2.0 to 3.0 GPA range with information on college financial aid, one-on-one discussions with college counselors and other college-related information that many low-income students don't have access to.

This weekend, seven more Richmond students are among 50 in the Bay Area taking part in a similar College Summit workshop at UC Berkeley.

LPS seniors Lee Briscoe, Jasmine Miller, Soraida Muro, Cieona Richards, Bianca Rizzo, Elizabeth Rojas and Izaiah Williams are listening to presentations on college admissions, writing personal statements and having one-on-one conversations with college counselors.

"That sounds simple, but for many of our (participating) students, they haven't had the opportunity to do those things," said Paul Collins, California program director for the organization. "A lot of these kids are just now hearing for the first time that they're able to go to college."

After the workshop, participating students are designated as student leaders and serve as mentors during a class similar to the workshop offered to all seniors at LPS.

Collins said the purpose of the program and workshops is simple: to get low-income students excited about the possibility of college.

Forty-seven percent of low-income high school students enroll in a university or other post-secondary program and upper-income graduates enroll 82 percent of the time, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Collins said College Summit works with several Bay Area school districts in addition to LPS, including Oakland Unified. Determining which districts the nonprofit group works with is a result of the organization seeking out low-income districts, and individual schools and districts seeking out the organization.

Collins said the workshop is often a life-changing event for the students, who discover a lot about who they are and what they're capable of.

That holds true for Washington, who said she's e-mailed 30 of her friends to encourage them to get involved in the program. And whereas before college wasn't on her radar, now she's considering applying at several places, including Howard University, Loyola Marymount and Chico State.

"Their lives are changed," Collins said. "We get everything from 'I didn't know I could write like this,' to 'I didn't know I could go to college.' A lot of tears are shed as they release a lot of fears and expectations for their futures."

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